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“OLD PURIST JUNK”

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“I well know that the infallibilists, a very numerous body, deem quite otherwise, each for himself; and it is, therefore, only a lowlier class of mortals that I can count on as finding my views acceptable.”—FITZEDWARD HALL, *Modern English* (1873).

The purist is surely one of the strangest of God’s creatures. What would be thought of a biologist who insisted with violence, because of gill-slits plainly discernible in the first stage of an embryo, that the resultant pug puppy must be nothing else than a fish—a very palpable fish? or of a geologist who refused heatedly to see quite obvious embedded shells because he had at hand learned proof that the formation was solely igneous? And yet the purist goes continually to lengths just as absurd. He looks with apparent care at a perfectly indisputable fact of English usage. It is not to his taste; it is not symmetrically formed; it is plainly hybrid. Angrily spitting, he declares there is no such beast!

All this would be merely funny—like the story of Alexander Cruden which Dr. Crothers tells in *The Gentle Reader*—if it were not harmful. One could have rare sport in digging pitfalls of idiom for the straitly logical purist, or in confounding etymological purists, such as insist on the root meaning of *aggravate*, with the essential derivative identity of *amanuenses* and *chirurgeons*, and proposing to them to use *let* and *humor* and *delirious* only in their most ancient significations. But, unfortunately, purism is no laughing matter. For no real purist is content merely to shun an expression he dislikes—as he has of course every right to do; he insists in foisting his taboo upon everybody else. Specious and persistent quacksalvers, the tribe of purists are convincing because of their obtrusive and weighty assurance. And we school teachers are not their only victims. Even more credulous iterations than ours of their worst misconceived dicta about usage are to be found

in newspaper style sheets and in manuals of business English—places above all others where one would naturally look for guides to practically effective expression.

But if our profession has not been the worst afflicted with purist dementia, it is likely nevertheless that we teachers do wider harm in propagating it than any other sort of people; we have such a rich chance. How many schoolrooms are made unpleasant by nagging and often finical persecution; how many conscientious teachers sacrifice themselves in heroic vigils and bristling, ceaseless correction of what might—and should—be *let altogether alone!* Such procedure sacrifices with a dreadful completeness any possibility of achieving the really essential ends of English teaching. While in a few children it breeds sterile priggishness and puritanism of expression, in most its sole result is a not unreasonable rebellion and a laying of painful inhibitions upon all attempts at really better speech and writing. For scattering correction at numberless points can establish nothing whatever permanently where alone it can be of use—in habit. Habit forming, we are coming to realize, requires a tremendous deal more of concentrated attention and rigorous labor than we have even pretended to give it through lessons in grammar and rhetoric.

And what is even more serious, in our weary preoccupation with a hundred mere insignificant conventions of wording and idiom we have left almost untouched more fruitful topics—far more important in their relation to thought power, with which conventions are practically unrelated—of organization of ideas and of coherent, solid construction in both sentences and themes.¹ Our nice conscientiousness has been sadly misled, by dictatorial and wise-sounding but often densely ignorant pronouncements, into a teaching, not alone of fiddle-faddle niceties, but of positive untruth about present usage. I suggest that for a very considerable part of the actual difficulties and regrettable ill successes of our English teaching—I know at least that it is true of my own—the blind leading of purists is responsible.

¹ See Edgar D. Randolph, "Conventional Aversions versus Fundamental Errors," *Pedagogical Seminary*, XXIV (September, 1917), 318 ff; and Allen Cross, "Staples of Grammar and Composition," *Elementary School Journal*, XVIII (December, 1917), 253 ff.

If this is indeed true, the remedy is surprisingly simple. It is merely to make no alteration whatever in the conventional details of children's expression—grammatical forms, idiomatic phrasing, or choice and pronunciation of words—except in complete certainty, based on real authority and not on an uninformed and arbitrary dictum in some handbook, that the emendation is both true to present usage *and also essential*. I have again and again heard pupils corrected for mispronouncing words—*automobile*, for instance—when the dictionary, immediately at hand, showed two pronunciations as fully accredited. The use of *if* for *whether* I have myself ignorantly railed against, and the use of *try and find*, and so on. I have sinned and strayed even as the publicists.

But why suggest reference to the dictionaries for authority upon usage? Why this rather than the sweeping and cocksure purist handbook and its glossary of wrong expressions? Not, of course, because any dictionary is infallibly right—not even the masterly edifice of scholarship built by Dr. Murray and his fellow-editors, the *New English Dictionary*—but simply because staffs of dictionary editors, before attempting to record the facts of current usage, at least seek to discover what these facts are. The typical handbook makes no such attempt; an individual authority there prates at length of the perils of trusting in the best English one hears, because it is probably provincial—he generally means American—or in such living writers as Mr. Galsworthy or Mrs. Wharton, for example, because they are not yet embalmed as classics. And he is of course right in the sense that no merely local authority and no individual peculiarity or carelessness of expression can constitute a validation of any usage. Only a sufficient body of data to show that an expression is *preponderantly* used, or at least used in a large proportion of reputable cases, can furnish adequate proof. But the purist is not in the least interested in collecting data, in any quantities whatever. He pursues a cheap and easy method. In addition to a few prejudices and predilections of his own heaped in for good measure, he merely copies unaltered the list of prohibitions and prescriptions of a few previous purists. His handbook may be quickly recognized, once one knows its type. A majority of its dicta are to be traced

back in an undeviating line to Dr. Campbell's comments on usage in England in 1776, their victorious progress undeflected by so small a matter as clearly observable changes in usage—something like the mythical march of peccaries in the *Swiss Family Robinson*! The dictionaries, on the other hand, give a reasonably true, a practicable record, particularly of *literary* usage—even if not any completely scientific proof. Where the *New English Dictionary* is not available, the chief American ones—in cases of serious doubt a consensus of these—give all essential information. At least nobody is likely to err toward radicalism or vulgarism if he follows and accepts their findings.¹

The subject of colloquialism is worthy of mention because it is a special haunt of purist injunctions. One dictionary has even become so far infected with this poison that it defines colloquialism as meaning "sometimes vulgar or dialectal." Since this records a prevalent misconception, which indeed one sometimes finds even among teachers and other educated persons, the term may ultimately have to be abandoned to its enemies. But its present real meaning is well presented by Dr. Murray in the Preface to the *New English Dictionary*, and graphically bodied forth in a diagram, wherein the field of established usage—"the great body of words whose Anglicity is unquestioned"—is divided with even honors between the literary and the colloquial, with various more or less disputed purlieus about each. Good colloquial usage is undoubtedly the standard of speech and writing which all our pupils will be called upon to attain in practically all circumstances. We do not, indeed, know enough about what really is colloquial usage

¹ Since writing this I have found a recent careful student of usage, Dr. J. Lesslie Hall, while agreeing that most of the great dictionaries furnish a fairly safe support, adding that most of them are too likely to admit more words than they can find reputable authority for (*Studies in Usage*, p. 24). I was curious to find how Dr. Hall's citations of dictionary authority tallied with this opinion. I found that he quotes, from seven dictionaries, an aggregate of 293 favorable judgments and only 56 unfavorable ones—a clear field, apparently, for demonstrating too wide inclusion. But Dr. Hall himself, where he comes to any decision from the data he has collected, *fully disputes only nine*, or less than three per cent, of the favorable judgments; he *clearly goes against fifteen*, or nearly 27 per cent, of the unfavorable judgments, and is inclined to question twenty-one more. Judging by his own reactions, then, Dr. Hall would seem to accuse the principal dictionaries rather of a niggardly strictness and inhospitality than of over-liberality.

today; it is not as easily investigated as the literary usage of books and documents. But at any rate a usage which one finds properly recorded as colloquial must certainly not be considered as thereby banned from the English classroom or from any but the most solemn and formal themes. Objection to real colloquialism is surely as wrong as that against genuine Americanisms, which one finds even yet in the common attitude of purists toward such words as *depot* for *station*. And many recent studies of so-called errors of school children have been unfortunately given to listing, as equally heinous with illiteracy or even lumped in a common category with it, a whole mixed class labeled "colloquialisms."¹

It is probable that we shall always look to scholars to do in a well-informed and rational way what the purist does so very badly, although a pioneer of the students of usage in the scientific spirit, Fitzedward Hall, insists and sufficiently exemplifies that "a positively futile word is pretty sure, in our time, to get its deserts quite irrespectively of clamor," and suggests that critics "forbear violent speech about it."² Men who have actually gained some understanding of the principles of usage may well make recommendations of conservation or of reform. But such men do not afflict us with baseless and arbitrary dogmatism, for they know that in matters of language it is "nobody's business to legislate and determine," but simply to record with painstaking accuracy what good current practice actually is.³

I know it is very unsafe indeed to descend from shrouding heights of generalization and appear with bodily examples. But the danger must be faced if any good is to come from opening this question. I therefore append a list of words and idioms which I have seen flatly, often angrily, condemned in handbooks and courses,

¹ See especially Diebel and Sears, "A Study of the Most Common Mistakes in Pupils' Written English," *Elementary School Journal*, XVIII (November, 1917), 172.

² *Modern English* (Scribner, Armstrong, 1873), pp. 89 ff.

³ In addition to books already cited, I hardly need call attention to such studies as Jespersen's *Progress in Language* and *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Lounsbury's *Standard of Usage and Standard of Pronunciation*, and Krapp's *Modern English, Its Growth and Present Use*. The last makes a valuable distinction between levels of usage—vulgar as well as colloquial and literary—and defines what is good expression in each. If these books were as widely known as purist handbooks now are, there would be no need of this paper.

that still enjoy repute and following—prohibitions unbased, so far as I have been able to find, upon the facts of current good use. If this public proclamation of their good standing in such reputable quarters as the *New English Dictionary* can avail to lead anybody to unconditional truce with any of them, it will lighten by so much the useless war burden of English teachers. It may be that with some lightening of our load we can get the comparatively few essential conventions established, and have some time besides for dealing with more fundamental matters of coherent organization and expression of thought.

above is in good use as an adjective according to *N*¹ §C-1, and *W*.¹

aggravate does mean *annoy*, *vex*, and so forth, purists to the contrary notwithstanding: *N* §7; *W* §3.

try and, come and, go and (in place of *try to*, etc.) are perfectly correct idioms, used by Milton, Johnson, and so on: *N* §10; *W* §2.

and and **but** are *not wrong* at the beginning of sentences; see any standard writer; that their overuse becomes abominable does not excuse teaching untruth about them.

between—among. The distinction usually taught is not true to good usage; cf. *N* §V-19 and *W*, *Syn*.

company meaning *guests* is quite correct: *N* §§4 and 5; *W* §§2-5.

depot means station *in the United States*, according to *N* §5, *W* §4.

each other—one another—synonymous without distinction: *N* §5, etc.

either for one of several things, etc., is passed without censorship: *N* §2c; *W* §2.

endorse for *approve* is in good odor in usage since Elizabethan times: *N* §2a, *W* *indorse*, §4. The purists' objection to this is a good illustration of their uneasiness at any figurative expression; compare *portray*, *take stock in*, and the like.

firstly is proper, despite a continuous purist howl through the centuries: *N* §1; *W*; examples in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, etc.

fix and **fix up** are in good use as meaning "arrange, make ready, adjust": *N* §14a; and as "chiefly U. S." are rated colloquial in *N* §14b and in *W*, as meaning "put to rights, make tidy, rig up."

get sick, etc., are quite correct idioms: *N* §§29-33; *W* *get*, *v.i.*, §1.

have got (a nose, etc.)—noted as parallel to the Greek for "to have acquired" in the same usage—is in good use from 1596 to Ruskin and other moderns: *N* §24.

¹ *W* = Webster's *New International Dictionary*; *N* = the (Oxford) *New English Dictionary*.

if in noun clauses undoubtedly means *whether* in the best current use—after *see, ask, learn, doubt, know*, particularly: *N* §II-9; contrast *W* §2—most probably a misstatement of present practice. In a recent preliminary survey of colloquial usage (cf. note on *shall-will*, below) I found *if* outnumbering *whether* more than two to one.

near-by as an adjective is marked "now chiefly U.S." by *N* §C; "colloquial" by *W*; it is used oftener today than a few years ago.

nice has an unusually interesting history of changes; for present meanings see *N* §5; *W* §11 (marked *colloquial*).

none are is still objected to by unusually uninformed purists; *N* gives it as "now the commoner usage, the singular being expressed by no one."

per day, and the like—quite in good standing: *N* §III; *W* *per* as prep., §1.

presume does mean suppose: *N* §4; *W* §2.

pretty as an adverb has a clear record of accepted usage: *N* §1; *W* §2.

proven is perfectly proper: *N* *prove* §A2; *W* *proven*; it is used, among others, by Landor, who was almost as finical a purist as R. G. White.

providing and **provided** are equally correct: *N* *provided* §II.

quick and **slow** are in as good repute as *fast* in adverbial use.

quite has other meanings than *entirely*; cf. *N.* and *W.*, etc.

raise as *substantive* is quite correct; oddly enough *rise*, which I had been taught as the more elevated term, is marked "colloquial" as meaning an advance in salary, etc. The pronunciation with *s* as *z*, in spite of strong purist teaching to the contrary, is given as now preferred: cf. *N.*, etc.

receipt of course means recipe, in spite of the handbooks: *N* §1, etc.

shall-will. It is clear that *will* is the normal first-person future auxiliary, except in questions (see for example Dr. Curme's "Has English a Future Tense?" in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XII [October, 1913], 15). The reason perhaps is that in the usual future the *subject of the verb normally controls* (cf. *N.*, article *shall*, §8b[a]). In a preliminary study of colloquial usage (in stenographic reports of cross-examination at trials, with lawyers and witnesses selected as men of education and standing) I have found only 36 instances of *shall* in 251 first-person futures. We need not tamper with this idiom at all; usage has here adjusted itself to meaning in spite of the purists; that it has done so completely in recent years, witness the usage of the best speakers and writers among teachers.

should-would: much the same is true, except in *if*-clauses; but idioms like "I should say" and "I should like" make *should* much commoner than *shall*.

stop does mean *stay*, in England at least; but is it ever used by American youths, that there should be so profuse a littering of purist handbooks with objections to it?

swim and **sing** have both *u-* and *a-*forms in the past tense.

that and **this** are perfectly correct as adverbs (*N* *that*, §5; *this*, adv.; *W* *that* "colloq."; *this* not treated).

that for **who** is actually condemned in a recent study of children's "errors!" **then** is recognized as an adjective by all the dictionaries I have seen.

to be through is quite acceptable in its usual sense of having finished: *N* §§5c and 6; *W* says "colloq."

very and **too** are often condemned as direct modifiers of a participle. Fitted-ward Hall treats this usage adequately—and of course finds it quite good in his day, as it is now—in *Modern English*, pp. 54 and 55.

As to matters of idiom and construction as well as of wording, only a small sampling can be given. Such points should be noted as the "incorrect passive" ("He was given command"), the split infinitive, the "split participle" (really a preposition-gerund phrase), and even the "split verb" ("would never admit" and the like, apparently), the "progressive passive participle" ("is being built"), and such "hidden grammatical errors" as "He worked as hard as he could"; all these I have actually seen condemned in high places—style sheets in great editorial offices and instructions to graduate students! It need hardly be said to anyone who has observed the best literary usage of any modern period that these condemnations are the most unobservant purist logic-mongering.¹ As to pronunciation, more points than could possibly be cited come to my notice. The only safety in all these regions, I have suggested, is *never to make a correction unless you are absolutely sure it is right and essential*. This puts the burden of proof at once where it belongs, banishes arbitrariness and much futile harrying, with its hideous destruction to a child's confidence in his power to direct his efforts intelligently, and in the end will save an immense burden of time and effort. But, far more important, it will aid in concentrating attention upon the places where it is most needed, in establishing necessary expressional habits and cultivating actual power in effective expression.

¹Obviously, any one of these constructions may or may not be desirable in a given place; as suggested above regarding *and* and *but* beginning sentences, it may be awkward or unnecessary. But to admit that is another affair from branding it incorrect. This distinction between what is *wrong*—a gross violation of convention—and what is *unadvisable*, because inferior in clearness or force or elegance, is invariably lost sight of in purist lists; everything from the wholly barbaric "he done it" to the merely *cliché* "in the case of" or "along these lines" is alike labeled "shalt not." There are no gradations whatever.